

The Intelligencer.

OFFICE: Nos. 25 and 27 Fourteenth Street
The Convict Labor Question—What Will the Legislature Do?

We observe that the opponents of the present system of letting out the labor of the penitentiary are moving with a view of bringing about such a change at the hands of the present Legislature as will conduce to the better protection of labor outside the prison walls. How to bring about such a change is the problem that puzzles them in common with most people who have undertaken to deal with the question. It is not to be denied that the cheap labor of the penitentiary has produced a baneful effect on certain kinds of labor. It has very seriously affected the wagon and broom industries of this immediate region, but of other sections of the country. Wheeling once had an important wagon and carriage industry. To-day it has dwindled down to inconsiderable proportions. This has been in part at least owing to the employment of the convict labor at Moundsville in the manufacture of wagons. As a consequence, no class of men are more hostile to prison labor than those whose living has thus been invaded by its undermining influence. They naturally ask for a remedy at the hands of the Legislature.

This question was up before the Legislature of 1879. The legislation at that session finally took shape in the act of March 20th, known as the "act to provide for the use of convict labor on works of internal improvement companies, including railroad companies and public roads within the limits of the State." By this act the Board of Public Works was authorized "to furnish to any railroad or internal improvement company, or to any county to work on public roads, or any of hire, as many able-bodied male convicts from the penitentiary as may now or hereafter be there, as can be spared without interfering with contracts heretofore made, to be used by such companies in the construction of their works within the State."

It was expected when this act passed that a considerable number of the convicts would be employed at an early day by a railroad company who were engaged in constructing a road through the ore region between Hinton, on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, and Dublin Station, on the Virginia and Tennessee road. For some reason—possibly because of previous contracts, and may be in part because of the rigorous provisions of the act, none of the labor of the penitentiary has been employed by this company. Hence the question of convict labor has remained practically undisturbed by the act of 1879.

We contended at that session that the act referred to was a step in the right direction, and we endeavored to show how some of the counties of the State might avail themselves of it to great advantage by employing convict labor on their roads. There is, as every one knows, great need for better roads in West Virginia, and our road law is a perpetual bone of contention in the Legislature. No odds what shape it takes from time to time, the changes give very indifferent satisfaction. The road experience little benefit from new legislation. Road tax is something the farmers do not like to pay. They prefer to work out their taxes on the roads in their immediate vicinity once a year, and we shall know the result of the work done after it is visited with one or two good soaking rains. The repairs are made without skill, and are of the most temporary and shiftless character. And this will always be the case until either some money is levied in the shape of a tax on the property of the county for road purposes, and the roads let out by contract to expert road builders, or until the convict labor of the State is made use of as the next best substitute.

The people of Preston county have had a great deal of road agitation at one time and another. The present Senator from that county owes his nomination, in part at least, to his championship of the idea of taxing the property of the county for keeping up the roads, and releasing non-property holders from an obligation to work on the public highways. It has never seemed right that a man who had no support for his family except his day labor, should be compelled to give two or three days of work each year to keeping up the roads. Property is fairly entitled to bear this burden. The question therefore is how can this burden on property be lightened as much as possible. Our answer is by the employment of convict labor as provided for in the act of March 20th, 1879. A gang of twenty-five convicts could be worked in Preston county for at least six months in each year to the greatest advantage of the roads and public interests of that county. They could be worked under local supervision, housed in portable shanties and fed cheaply on good substantial diet. In the course of six months a gang of twenty-five able-bodied convicts, under intelligent and energetic supervision, would work a decided change for the better in the road system of that county. And what is true of Preston is true of many other counties.

Of course there are no public works owned by the State in which convict labor can be employed. The State is prohibited from engaging in such enterprises. She cannot subscribe to, appropriate money in aid of, or undertake on her own account any system of public improvements, except in the way of public buildings. Therefore the employment out-of-doors of our convict labor must either come from a demand on the part of the counties or from private corporations. At this time there seems to be no prospect of its employment by private corporations, although it is not unlikely that some of the several important enterprises will materialize during the pending of the present railroad boom, and in that way, perchance, create a demand for all the convicts at Moundsville.

There really seems to us to be no other solution of this vexed problem of convict labor than through the methods we have suggested. It is a serious problem to deal with. Convicts cannot be kept idle in the prisons. That would be both expensive and demoralizing. They must be employed at some kind of labor. They need to be trained to labor with a view to their reformation and their usefulness in subsequent life. At present their labor is let at low rates to contractors. This is because their labor is necessarily inferior to that of honest skilled labor, and because contractors being compelled to contract a year or two ahead for a supply of it, seek to protect themselves against the fluctuations of the market by getting it at the lowest possible rates. At the same time, it is a question to be considered whether the State should not seek to get a higher average for convict labor, with a view both of assuring that much protection to outside labor, and also at the same time making the penitentiary as near a source of public revenue as possible.

WASHINGTON.

LIFE AT THE MOUTH OF OUR POLITICAL UNIVERSE.

Congressional and Committee Affairs—Political and General Gossip—Presidential and Probabilities of Various Measures—Transactions in Congress.

WASHINGTON, January 10.—Mr. Voorhees asked to have printed and recommit the bill authorizing the construction of a building for the Congressional library. So ordered.

Mr. Logan introduced a bill to authorize the appointment of General Grant on the retired list of the army. The bill was read at length, upon the request of Mr. Conkling. It provides that in recognition of the eminent public services of General Grant, the President be authorized to appoint him, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, to the retired list of the army, and to pay him the pension to which he is entitled under the act of March 3, 1877, and to grant him the honor of a full and complete pardon for all offenses committed by him during his military career.

The morning hour, having expired, discussion was resumed on the bill for the relief of Wm. Holliday. Mr. McDonald addressed the Senate.

Mr. McDonald spoke in favor of the bill, reviewing in detail the life of the subject of the bill, and the services he had rendered to the country.

Mr. Bayard spoke in relation of the bill, and in support of the bill, he reviewed the life of the subject of the bill, and the services he had rendered to the country.

WASHINGTON, January 10.—By Mr. Price: Declaring the silver certificates to possess the same legal tender quality as the coin for which they were issued.

By Mr. Carpenter: To increase 50 per cent the duty on flaxseed or linseed, and the manufacture thereof; also proposing a Continental and national bank, and that all civil officers of the United States, except Judges of the Supreme and Inferior Courts, heads of Departments and officers whose duties are temporary, shall hold office for the term of four years, and that Congress may provide for the election by the people of postmasters and other officers whose duties are to be performed within the limit of any State, such officers to be subject to removal by the President on other than political or religious grounds.

STATE POLITICS.

SENATORIAL STRUGGLES AND GOVERNMENTAL INAUROURALS.

The New Situation—Some Senate News—Reports—Issues—Affairs—Tennessee Topics—Gov. Culture, of Ill., and Children, of Mo., Inaugurated.

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The delinquent taxes can be paid at Reasoner's drug store until the 15th inst., and the tax sales will be on Tuesday, the 18th. Persons wishing to purchase property at auction should call on these sales.

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